

The Tales of Mike and Max by rosswrites

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

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Summary:

A series of one-shots in which Mike Wheeler and Max Mayfield spar with nothing to lose and teenage drama follows.

1. The Lonely Lunch

Author's Note:

Part One of a series of Mike and Max and their miserable life as friends. Time: Early December, 1985.

Unrelated one shots with morals and all!

All of my fics (and more, shorter and better) writing is on Tumblr @strange-thangs.

“You haven’t gotten anything for Lucas yet, have you?”

“You haven’t gotten anything for El, either.”

“Yea but...” Mike hated that Max was right. He had yet to get El a Christmas present. But it wasn’t like he hadn’t tried. He’d been stressing over a gift for the last month. But nothing ever seemed *enough* for a girl with superpowers. You see, Mike was terrified of two things: disappointing his girlfriend, and a fist thrown from the girl sitting across from him. He lived in constant fear.

The time Mike and Max spent together was often as heated as the burnt french fries on Mike’s plate in front of him. The rest of the party had already left for class, leaving Mike and Max to eat together. Both of them had study hall next period, meaning they could take as much time eating as they wanted.

“At least I know what I’m getting Lucas.” Max said, a slight twist in her smile. Mike used to hate how direct Max was. She never seemed to take anyone’s shit. And her sarcasm was *lethal*. How in holy hell they’d let her in the party was a story Mike could never really piece together. It just *happened*. El and Max were such polar opposites that Mike tended to enjoy the 180 shift, from a quiet girl who was a *literal god-sent angel* to an outspoken girl with the vocabulary that would make the town priest run and hide. But that didn’t mean Mike and Max didn’t fight. When they fought, they *fought*.

“Yea, what are you getting him?” Mike taunted her, almost begging her to come at him. One too many of their lunch time conversations

ended in thrown food or *unintentionally* spilled drinks. Neither teen could ever admit they were wrong, at least to each other.

“An X-Man comic. He not-so-subtly pointed it out. You know how he is.” Max turned her head as she stuck her fork in the potatoes on her styrofoam plate. Her tone of voice, Mike thought, meant she thought she won the duel, a *repartee* of wit and snark. *Yea right*, Mike nearly whispered under his breath, *you’ve made a fatal mistake*.

“X-Men,” Mike said, lining up the fork and knife on the sides on his plate.

“What?” Max looked up from her plate, her fork sticking up in the air as it stayed stabbed in the potatoes that were slightly too stiff.

“You said X-Man. It’s *X-Men*. You’re dating a nerd. You should know that.” It took all the willpower in the world for Mike to not break into a smile. *I got her now. She’s trapped in a corner. I’d like to see her talk her way out of this one.*

“Well why isn’t it called X-People?” Max scoffed. There was war in her eyes. She unfolded her arms and rested them on the table. *A power move*, Mike thought. *She’s making herself seem bigger to scare me off. We learned that in Bio yesterday!* “There’s women in the group right? Only seems fair.”

“Well that’s how its always been!” Mike nearly shouted. He was tired and hungry, the food no longer appetizing. Max was making it worse. “I don’t make the rules!”

“Shit dude, chill! No need to get protective.” Max raised her eyebrows and pushed her plate forward. She looked at Mike and then decided to go for the argument ending blow: “What, you’re not used to a girl talking back? News Flash dude, not every girl is like some silent mutant from your comic books.”

Silence filled the air as more kids left the lunch room. The single sound of a metal chair groaned from across the room as a freshman dragged it on the concrete floor. Something in Mike snapped. *She went there. She fucking went there.*

“Why the fuck would you even say that?” Mike dealt with snide remarks from other students, but he never expected the sneers and off hand comments about his girlfriend to come full circle. He wanted nothing more than to throw Max’s potatoes in her face and storm out. But he was feeling petty today. “You know I don’t know what Lucas sees in you.”

Silence. They stared. Mike had never paid attention to those big blue eyes. The red veins told him that last night was another night where she cried herself to sleep. Lucas had said he needed a new super comm, something about too much use. He’d also seen how he came in every morning, red eyed and sleepy. Mike saw the pain in Max’s eyes, the same pain he saw in El’s whenever she talked about her life before him. A pain hit him square in the chest. *Lucas is to Max what I’m to El.* Max had a shitty life too. Mike was going to apologize when his thought was cut short.

“Alright fuck this,” Max said, standing up. Her face said something that Mike couldn’t read. He picked up *‘make a move and I’ll kill you’* and *‘listen here you fucker,’* yet there were no tears in her eyes. *She’s too strong for that.* “I know you didn’t mean that. And shit, you know I didn’t mean what I said. Can we just stop fucking trying to one up each other? It’s bullshit.”

Mike stood up so they were at eye level again. He stared at Max in silence.

“I’m sorry,” Mike said, trying his hardest to convey to her that he truly was, that he wasn’t being sarcastic, that he just wanted to be friends for one god damn second. “Really.”

“Come on,” Max said as she grabbed Mike’s wrist and started to pull him towards the door to the lunch room, completely ignoring the mess left on the table.

“What? Let go of me!” Mike was trying to pull his wrist from Max’s grasp but her hand only squeezed tighter. *This wasn’t like Max at all.* “What are you doing?”

“Forced bonding,” Max said, nearly dragging Mike through the doors. “Study hall ends in 45 minutes. The jewelry store is 5 minutes by

bike. Tomorrow morning you bring me your mom's hot chocolate and we're even."

"Deal." *This girl was a fighter*, Mike thought. *A kind warrior*. Just like his girlfriend. Just like all of his friends. *Maybe that's why we kept her around*. "I still hate you."

"Hate you too, dickhead."

2. The One at the Diner

Summary for the Chapter:

When Mike Wheeler and Max Mayfield show up to the same diner on the same night at the same time, something tells them that their dates will not go as planned.

Notes for the Chapter:

I wish I could say Mike and Max are best friends, but we all know that's not true.

Timeline: Late December 1985.

All of my fics (and more, shorter and better) writing is on Tumblr @strange-thangs.

6:35 PM, *The Diner just off Elm Street*

“Max?”

“Mike?” Max wanted nothing more than to melt in place. One moment she was reading a menu, looking for the home made chicken noodle soup Lucas had recommended, waiting for him to show up, and the next, she was staring down *Mike Wheeler*. Lucas had said this was a special date night. Just for the two of them. *So why was the asshole Mike Wheeler here?* “What the hell are you doing here?”

“What are *you* doing here?” Mike eyed Max’s outfit, her slightly more respectable button down and jeans radically different than the sweatshirt and sweatpants she had been wearing earlier that day in school.

“I asked first.” Max indignantly dropped the menu down in front of her. The diner was nearly packed, an odd occurrence for a Friday night in Hawkins. If the shame of sitting alone in a diner waiting for her date to show up hadn’t already chipped away at her pride, having *Mike* see her sitting alone surely would have.

“El wanted to go out for dinner,” Mike still had his hands in his pockets, the bitter December cold still lingered even though the diner’s front door had been closed. “She said meet her at the diner at six thirty.”

“Oh, so it’s a date?” Max replied, raising her eyebrows.

“It’s not a date!” Mike nearly yelled.

It was, in fact, a date.

12:20 PM, Hawkins High, Earlier that day

“Hey Mike,” El appeared as Mike closed his locker door. “Are you busy tonight?”

“It’s Friday,” Mike put down his backpack and knelt down to put away his text books before the next class started. “Let me think,” Mike scrunched up his face, and then dropped it. He looked straight into El’s eyes and said “I have nothing. We’re with each other all the time. You know my schedule better than I do!”

“I know,” El blushed. Her face went from a slight tan to a bright pink. It was Mike’s favorite color. El was holding her history textbook close to her chest. Mike could see she was gripping it a bit too tight: her finger tips were red. “You and me - dinner - I want to try that diner on Elm.”

“Dinner?” Mike nearly let out a laugh, but instead he just blew slightly more air out of his nose than normal.

“Yes or no?” El’s eyes stayed locked with Mike’s as he stood up, his head seemingly a foot taller than her own.

“Okay. I’ll be there,” Mike smiled as he tightened up his backpack. “What time?”

“Six thirty,” El replied, not missing a beat.

“Six thirty,” Mike repeated, as he reached forward and kissed her on her head. Normal kisses were too difficult, and thus only for special occasions. Mike would never tell her how much he really loved those

head kisses, though. Her hair always smelled like her vanilla candle scented shampoo.

“Love you,” El said forcing a smile.

“Love you too.”

6:38 PM, The Diner just off Elm Street

“You and El going out to dinner? That’s the textbook definition of a date,” Max said as she looked at the menu again, trying to draw attention away from the fact that she was still sitting alone.

“Yeah well what are you doing here?” Mike tilted his head. Max could sense a bit of snark in his words.

“For your information, Lucas asked me out on a date.”

“Yea well I don’t see him,” Mike started to pull off his jacket.

Max shifted in her seat. Mike was right: Lucas wasn’t there. But she’d never admit to Mike or herself that Lucas stood her up.

“He’s...uh” Max started to fiddle with the fork and knife in front of her. *Lucas had said he’d be there.*

3:30 PM, Hawkins High, Earlier that day

“Hey, I’ll see you at the arcade, right?” Max said, as she pushed open the doors to reveal a cold blast of air. Shuttering, she stuffed her hands in her pockets and burrowed her head into her scarf. “I heard they got a new game.”

“Um I was actually thinking of going to the diner on Elm.” Lucas pulled his gloves out of his pockets. His hands were shaking so hard that he nearly dropped them in the process.

“You’re just afraid I’m gonna beat you,” Max mumbled from behind her many layers of warmth. *Indiana winters were nothing like California.*

“No!” Lucas’ utterance gave Max the impression he was more than

mildly offended. Lucas continued to walk towards the bike rack and pulled his bike out, Max's skateboard still hanging in the front basket. "We go to the arcade every Friday. Lets just do something different. Just the two of us."

"Are you asking me out on a date, stalker?" Max stopped in her tracks. She tilted her head and smiled. "What, are we dating? Am I your *girlfriend*?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, you are." Lucas sternly looked into he eyes. He kept his face hard and his brow spoke of slight defeat. Their relationship was unspoken but *burning*. They cared for each other a bit too much. She grabbed him by the arm and pulled him close.

"You tell me the time and I'll be there." Max could feel the warmth emanating from his jacket. They weren't as physical as Mike and El, but their moments were just as intimate. Lucas would respect her space, and Max loved that. Growing up in her home, physical contact was often something to be avoided. They never hugged or kissed or even held hands in front of the party.

"I don't know, how about six thirty? Not too late but not too early." Lucas pulled away from her grasp. He took out her skateboard and handed it to her, mounting his bike. "Their chicken noodle soup is amazing."

6:40 PM, The Diner just off Elm Street

"Well I guess I'll take a seat then," Mike said, peering around to see if there were any open booths. Max saw his face drop. His eyes stared with a sense of dismay at the only open booth: the one right behind Max. She kept her head sheltered in the menu, stealing a glance at Mike as he passed by.

With a loud *umph* Max heard Mike drop down on the cushioned seat, his weight shaking her own. A waiter flew by and placed a menu and a glass of water on Mike's table.

"Can I get another menu?" Mike's voice was quiet amongst the monotonous chatter of the diner. Max turned to see the waiter give Mike the fakest smile she had ever seen. When the waiter returned

Max could almost feel how awkward Mike was. *Mike without El*, Max thought, *was like a flat tire. It still functioned, but it was miserable.*

Max continued to look over the menu in front of her. She'd instructed the waiter that *the other guest would be here shortly*. But *shortly* was turning into something past normal. The clock on the wall read six forty-five. *Fifteen minutes late. Lucas was never late.*

Mike continually tapped his fingers on the table, his leg bouncing more than usual. He pulled up his sleeve to look at his watch. *Six forty-five*. Something wasn't right. *El had said six-thirty. She said it like it was some kind of important thing that I had to remember.*

Mike looked back at the menu in front of him. *They have waffles. El would want waffles for dinner.* Mike glanced up to the empty seat across from him. His mind raced, images of men in suits and guns and hospital rooms ran through his head. *No. She's safe. It all ended.* He shook his head and went back to the menu. The only way he could clear his mind was to talk.

"So...What are you gonna get?" Mike's voice bounced off the table. He could hear Max put the menu down behind him.

"I don't know" Max replied with a snarky tone that forced Mike to roll his eyes.

"Angry 'cus your boyfriend didn't show up?" Mike didn't even think to question what he was saying. He knew it was the truth. *Why dance around it?*

"Angry 'cus your *girlfriend* stood you up?" Max was always one to hit back harder. And Mike knew she was the Queen of the One-Two punch. He was just waiting for the blow, "I heard she and the senior in her chemistry class were hanging out under the bleachers. She's probably over at his house now."

"Yea, and Lucas is over at Jennifer's house," Mike retorted. "He always had a thing for blondes."

Max turned around and faced the back of Mike's head.

"I thought we said we'd stop." Max had a sense of compassion in her voice that Mike wasn't expecting. He turned around to face her, his knees now on the bench cushion.

"We did"

"Then why are we doing it again?"

Mike took a moment to contemplate *why* he still pushed Max's buttons. He wasn't mean. He wasn't sadistic. Yet some *part* of him liked seeing a reaction. He liked feeling *validated*. Like he had some sort of impact on the world.

"Why do you hate me?"

Mike was pulled out of his train of thought.

"I don't hate you. I just feel like sometimes we're fighting to be in control or something."

Something in Max shifted. A flood gate cracked. A door to cage with a monster inside opened. She had kept her anger inside. She had let it boil and released it when it was right. She fought. She nearly killed. She was stone. She was glass.

"I hate it. I'm not trying to steal anything. I'm just angry. All the time." Max dropped her eyes to the worn cushion in between them. "My life sucks. Your life sucks. Our parents are useless. We were both lonely. We fought a literal monster together. You would think we'd be friends."

"You would think," Mike said as he let out a laugh. "Yet here we are."

Mike let out deep sigh. He looked Max in the eyes.

"I'm sorry for being a dick."

"I'm sorry too."

Max turned around and sat back down. She didn't want to push any

further. They came to terms. That was all she needed.

“Still no sign from El?” Max asked sincerely. She rarely used that tone of voice with Mike.

“No. It’s seven. This isn’t like her to be late.”

“I’ve never seen Lucas late to anything.” Max started to tap her toe inside of her winter boots.

“Did Lucas seem a bit weird when he was asking you out to dinner?”

“How did you know?” Max turned around again to see Mike already turned, and they met eyes again.

“Because El was really pushy and she’s never pushy.”

“Let’s think about this. Both Lucas and El asked us out on dates—”

“-On the same night-

”-At the same diner-”

“-At the same time-”

“-And both of them are late?”

Mike and Max broke eye contact the moment they heard a chair squeal across the floor. They turned their heads to see Lucas and El get up.

“Finally!” Lucas nearly yelled from across the diner.

“Mike I’m surprised you didn’t figure it out sooner” El walked over to the now vacant table that sat parallel to the two booths that Mike and Max were occupying.

“What the hell is this?” Max stood up, her brow furrowed and her face as red as her hair. Mike stood up too, though his face was one of relief. He had completely forgotten about his fear of El being missing. He almost felt bad about it.

“El told me that she hated how you two constantly fight. So I suggested we each ask you out but then leave you two together. What do you call it? Forced bonding?”

“El! I was scared you got hurt!” Mike reached out and grabbed her hand. “What happened to *friends don’t lie*?”

“Mike, I was here the entire time. You weren’t scared. *Friends don’t lie*.” El laughed and pulled him into a hug. “And I wasn’t lying. We’re still going on a date!”

“So this was all your idea, stalker?” Max crossed her arms and tilted her head, standing tall, though Lucas still towered over her in height. “I guess the name fits.”

“I think a little stress is worth not having to hear you and Mike fight all the time.”

“Whatever. You made me wait a half hour. Lets eat.” Max and Lucas pushed another table together with the one Mike and El had already sat down at.

Over a dinner of shared waffles and endless chicken noodle soup, the four friends promised that Friday date night would become a tradition, even if they all hated each other.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks for reading! I'd love to hear your thoughts and opinions! I take requests on my tumblr or in the comments below!

3. The One with the Blanketfort

Summary for the Chapter:

Saturdays were sacred for Mike Wheeler and Max Mayfield wasn't invited. But when a party member is in need of assistance, Mike does the unthinkable: he lets Max stay over. How could this night get any worse?

Notes for the Chapter:

We all need fluff, and what better way to get fluffy than have a sleepover, right?

Timeline: January 1986

All of my fics (and more, shorter and better) writing is on Tumblr @strange-thangs.

Let's assume it was Saturday.

Mike Wheeler loved Saturdays. Saturday meant no homework, no studying, no school. Saturdays were for friends. Well, mostly El, but other friends too. Though the party loved spending time together, they spend most of their time in their respective groups, i.e., Mike and El, Lucas and Max, Dustin and Steve, and Will and a stress free day. Now, though Mike's Saturdays included spending literally *all day with El*, Saturday nights were a bit different.

Nothing good was ever on TV on Saturday nights. The library closed early on Saturday nights. Mike *would* go out with El on Saturday nights but he was caught one too many times sneaking out to visit the Hopper residence. Which, in turn, resulted in his Saturday Night Shut-in nickname amongst the party

Thus, Saturdays were for alone time: reading, planning D&D campaigns, and mostly *sleeping*.

That's why, when a party member called one Saturday, Mike figured something was *terribly wrong*.

Let's assume Mike Wheeler was in his kitchen. By no means was he a good cook. He wouldn't put it past his mother to give him a fake smile any time he helps her prepare some fancy dinner. Mike could barely use a toaster, let alone pan fry a steak.

That's why Mike was eating ice cream out of the carton at eight pm, cautiously looking over his shoulder to make sure his parents didn't catch him. Content with the sweet vanilla ice cream, Mike nearly lost track of his surroundings until the phone rings. Mike didn't care to answer.

Ring.

Ring.

"Mike, can you answer the phone?" Ted Wheeler called out, reclined in his favorite chair, with absolutely no intention of getting up.

Ring.

Fine. Whatever. Why do I have to do everything for this family, Mike thought, throwing his used spoon into the sink.

"Hello?" *If it's another telemarketer I swear to God...*

"Mike?" The voice seemed to choke out his name.

"El?! Is that you? Are you ok? What's going on?!"

"No, asshole—"

"Max?" Something about this struck Mike. Max *never* called Mike. She rarely spoke to him on the super-com. Granted, Max knew Mike's home phone number. *Hell, everyone know's each other's phone numbers.* It was priority number one after the events of the Fall of '84. *Memorize everyone's numbers. When the super-coms are unavailable, call home.*

"It's Billy and his dad they're fighting and and my mom told me to go to Lucas' and he's not home and I don't know where else to go and—"

"Max just calm down. You can come to my house. Where are you?"

Mike spat out his words, his mind cutting to flashes of a fight in the Byers house, of a fight in the school parking lot, of a fight last week in front of the arcade. "Are you safe?"

"I'm fine. I'm at the arcade. They had the closest phone."

"Do you need my mom to come pick you up or—"

"No, I'm fine. I'll there in a few. Thanks."

"Hey, no prob—" Mike was cut off by the sound of a dead phone line. *Typical.*

"Mom, Max is coming over. She's spending the night in Nancy's room."

Karen Wheeler had just walked down the stairs after spending a bit longer putting Holly to sleep than she originally planned. Mike only knew this because the bags under his mother's eyes had grown exponentially darker since he saw her take Holly up over an hour ago.

"What?!" Karen cocked her head, trying not to shout for fear of waking up Holly. "Max, as in Billy's sister Max?"

"Yeah, I know—" *Is she really gonna argue with me now?*

"It's past eight Michael—"

"But Billy and his dad were going at it again and—"

"I know, but why didn't she call Lucas? Aren't they—"

"Lucas is out of town. Mom, she needs some place to stay..."

Mike gave his mother *that look*. The look that says *this is serious and just listen to me*. The look he gave her when he said *Mom, this is Jane, but she prefers El*. Karen understood. She learned a lot. Yet there was still so much left unsaid.

"She can stay in Nancy's room," Karen replied. "I'll get some clean sheets. You make sure she's ok. Got it?"

Standing by the front window, Mike watched as his breath fogged up the glass. The cold March night, he thought, probably made Max's excursion less than ideal. *Shit, she's gonna hate me for that.* Max always declined help because she hated making people put in effort for her own problems. She's fiercely independent, and, in Mike's opinion, it made her hell to be around, especially when she *really needs help*.

Through the blurry, fogged up window Mike noticed a figure approaching. *Damn. That was quick.*

Walking fast enough so that he'd beat her to the door, afraid that, knowing Max, she'd probably knock or something and would wake up his sleeping father *and explaining to him why a GIRL who was not his girlfriend was at his house and especially why this GIRL who was not his girlfriend was STAYING OVER was NOT a conversation he'd like to have*, Mike swung the front door open and greeted Max, ready for a fiery conversation.

"Are you ok?" Mike asked reassuringly, noticing her normally tan hands now slightly blue and her rosy cheeks now almost purple. He also noticed the stuffed backpack on her shoulders, nearly hidden by her ever growing red hair.

"Yea I'm fine," Max replied. "Can I come in?"

Mike stepped out of the way and let Max in, closing the door behind her. He noticed how bitter the cold was and *how miserable she must be right now*.

"You packed a bag?" Mike asked, trying to break the tension of the moment.

"I have one uh" Max muttered, looking down at her shoes. "Just in case..."

"My Mom's getting Nancy's room ready you can stay—" Mike's reassuring tone was cut off by the appearance of none other than his previously sleeping father.

"What's going on?" Ted Wheeler nearly shouted monotonously, his

hands on his hips and his eyes red from being woken up from his nightly nap. "Mike, you think you can sneak girls into my house? A cockroach can't sleep here without me knowing about it!"

Mike nearly let out a laugh. *If only he knew.*

"Ted, you're awake?" A voice suddenly appeared from the stair case. Mike, Max, and Ted turned to see Karen standing with a pillow in her hands. Mike looked back to Max, noticing how somehow her face *got even redder than before.*

"Max is spending the night." Mike interrupted before Ted could retort.

"Why?" Ted turned his head back and forth between his wife and his son, seemingly upset he wasn't included in this event that *apparently the entire family is part of now.*

"Because...her parents are out of town and she has no where else to go." Karen jumped in, throwing a glare at Mike that he could only interpret to mean *don't worry I have this under control.*

"What happened to Jane?" Ted joked, dejectedly. "I liked her. She seemed like the only normal friend you have."

Since when do you care about my love life, dad? Mike was honestly surprised that his normally absent father remembered El, even after she'd spent multiple dinners with the family and spends nearly every waking moment with Mike.

"You liked her?" Karen said, surprisingly accusatory.

"Hey, if you're gonna go around breaking girls hearts at least don't do it to the Chief of Police's daughter!" Ted smiled, but part of Mike wanted to die and crawl into a hole. His father never made jokes. *And now he's making them at Max's expense? This Saturday just keeps getting better and better.*

"Ted!" Karen nearly shouted. For all those times Karen stood up for Mike, he never really realized how often he didn't even thank her. She cares, just like him.

“Don’t worry Mr. Wheeler,” Max spoke up, drawing the tension away from the fight that was surely brewing. “Mike and...*Jane* were talking about eloping the summer after senior year.”

Mike’s face went red. He sent a deadly glare at Max, who only responded with a cheeky smile. *Her sarcasm will kill us both, I swear to God*, he thought.

“Is that true Michael?” Ted turned, peering out from above his glasses.

“Of course its not true!” Mike retorted, trying to hide the red in his face. He and El were only *sort of* joking about running away after high school. But in the current moment, running as far away as he could get sounded like the best idea ever.

Karen came down from her spot on the steps and moved in between Mike and Ted, fearful of a brawl breaking out between the two.

“Michael, why don’t you show Max to Nancy’s room.” Karen nodded her head, repeatedly motioning to the stairs. Mike took the cue and nearly pulled Max up the stairs, eager to get out of this familial hellhole *fast*.

“Don’t do anything stupid, Michael!” Ted shouted, a hint of a smile on his lips.

Rolling her eyes, Karen smacked the back of his head and proceeded to follow the two teens up the stairs.

“Nancy’s spending the night at Steve’s. No wait that was last week. She’s spending the night with Jonathan.” Mike said, lingering in the doorway to Nancy’s room.

Seeing Max standing over the pink bedspread, pulling out small bags and clothes, Mike started to wonder how weird this must be for her. Pink was never her color, and now she’s surrounded by it. She never asked for help, yet here she was, eight thirty on a Saturday night getting ready for bed a stranger’s bedroom. She never backed down yet she stood there, more vulnerable than he’d ever seen her before.

“Hey are you sure you’re ok?” Mike asked, a feeling in his chest

telling him that *he already knew the answer*.

“Yea I’m fine.” *Bingo*. He decided he wouldn’t press any more. *She wants space. Just give her space*. Mike turned to leave, her response unsatisfying but still not unexpected.

“Thanks,” Max spoke, causing Mike to peer back into the bedroom. Max only had a half grin, a hidden smile, one that Mike knew how to make far too easily.

“No problem,” Mike answered, flashing a quick grin just like hers. “My Mom makes breakfast around seven.” *And that’s that*.

2:35 am

The alarm clock looked at Mike Wheeler and laughed. Waking up at ungodly hours hungry and dry mouthed was miserable. *At least it isn’t the nightmares*, he thought, pulling himself out of bed. Making his way down stairs, something felt wrong. It wasn’t Max, the door to Nancy’s room was closed and he swore he could hear the faint whisper of snoring. The house just felt too *still*. *Sometimes things are quiet*, he thought. *Not every day monster you fight is loud and angry. Some are hidden, sneaky, hibernating inside until they break free*.

Do not wake a sleeping bear. Wait for it to come to you.

Brushing the thought away, he passed the basement door when he noticed what was off. *The light is on in the basement. El!?* It was her safe space, the blanket fort, the place she went to when she had night terrors, had a bad day, or was just feeling somewhat blue. Mike had “lost” his house key one day and it had mysteriously ended up in her hands, permission to come over whenever she needed. There’d be days when he’d wake up and come down stairs to see her asleep in the fort, too kind to wake him up and let him know she’d snuck over.

Mike tiptoed the line between sprinting down the stairs to see if El was okay and quietly avoiding the creaking steps for fear of waking her if she was sleeping. What he did find, however, stopped him in his tracks.

Sitting at the D&D table, a girl in pj’s and a slightly too large

sweatshirt was staring at the corner shelf littered with toys and stuffed animals. Her ginger hair looked warm in the soft glow of the nightlight that Mike knew all too well from many nights sleeping in the fort.

Mike stood silently, watching as Max made her way into the blanket fort, sitting down, a tinge of introspection visible in her eyes as she ran her hands across the quilts that hadn't been moved in years.

It was an unspoken rule among the party: It's El's fort, and you didn't enter it without her permission. You especially didn't enter it in front of Mike. It was their thing, their bond, their special movie, their special quote, that one thing that they shared, that was theirs and no one else's.

Yet in this moment, Mike didn't care. He didn't care that Max came down in the middle of the night and snuck into the fort. He didn't care that she was encroaching on his and El's personal space. The fort was a place for comfort. And that's what she needed.

"El still loves it in there," Mike spoke up, making his presence known, the second hand embarrassment for Max making his stomach constrict.

"Sorry, I.." Max replied, her cheeks turning pink. "I couldn't sleep."

Mike noticed how her eyes were still red, the red that he'd seen a lot of when she became closer with the party. She didn't sleep much, and Mike knew that kind of red, the one where the veins are just one shade darker. But this red was different; it was soft yet biting. It was the same red he saw in his eyes whenever he'd look in the mirror after a night crying himself to sleep.

"I didnt believe Lucas at first." Max began to fidget with the frayed edges of the pillow that rested under her. "You really kept it up for the whole year?"

Mike didn't answer. He just flashed a smile. Max understood.

"Does El know I'm here?" Max spoke up again, this time making eye contact. Her red eyes were a testament to how scared she could be,

how afraid of disappointing others she was, how much she tried to hide her vulnerability. Mike only assumed Max was worried what kind of wrath a telekinetic girl would have if she found out another girl was spending the night at her boyfriend's house without her knowledge. He smiled.

"She knows I hate you. Don't worry about it," Mike laughed. El could get jealous, but not of Max. Not anymore, at least.

Silence lingered, and Mike began to question if whether or not his comedic jab at her was really appropriate given the current situation. Hell, they'd fought before. But they'd always make up. They were sorta-friends, a brother and sister who loved to hate each other. Siblings who were always pushing the other out of the way for attention. Mike, in that moment, watching Max sit in the fort, realized that they're the same. They longed for attention, affection, acceptance.

"Thanks, really," Max mumbled.

"Don't worry about it." Mike responded, sincerity in his voice. He walked closer to the fort and reached out his hand. "Friends?"

Max hesitated before grabbing the outstretched hand. "We're getting there."

Content with the situation at hand, Mike flashed a smile and turned to leave, but, standing at the bottom step, he contemplated pushing her, trying to get her to open up more. But that thought passed. *She will in time.*

"You know you can come here any time you need," Mike called out to the girl in the fort.

"I'm the one that called, remember?"

Walking down the steps the next morning, Mike was pleasantly surprised to see that Max was already awake and eating breakfast with Karen and Holly. She was still dressed in the same pajamas she had on last night, her ginger hair sticking out in places from the static of her extra large sweatshirt. They sat together at the table, set

for five, plates, cups, forks and knives all set out perfectly. Karen loved hosting parties. *It keeps her busy and out of my business.* A large plate of bacon and french toast sat in the middle of the table, still steaming from the oven.

Neither of the women were aware that Mike had come down the stairs and was watching them eat, smiling at the fact that Max was having a full on conversation with Holly about horses and unicorns and other mythical creatures. He'd never seen her so engaged, so happy, so relaxed. Holly loved when El babysat her. *Maybe Max could come too, get her out of that house for a few hours? She seems to be enjoying herself. But she is good at faking emotions.*

"Does El know that you spent the night?" Karen said to Max, smiling at her daughter and her daughters new best friend. Before Max could respond Mike walked up to the table and sat down.

"No, but El and I are going to the park this afternoon," Mike responded as he pouring himself some orange juice. "I'll tell her there."

Mike could feel Max's glare. It was one that said *did she just say what I think she just said?*

"Oh don't worry," Mike laughed, reaching for the last bits of bacon. "My mom knows everything. She loves El."

Max's face still held more confusion, her furrowed brow shouting *this is all news to me!*

"But last night you said Jane," Max questioned.

"Ted doesn't know," Karen began, pushing the last bits of food on Holly's plate together. "You saw how furious he was when he found we didn't tell him about you staying over. Now imagine how he'd react if he found out that there *was* a telekinetic girl with a shaved head staying in our basement and he *had* lied to the Department of Energy. It's a need to know basis, right?"

Mike let out a smile, knowing that, even though it's nice that he can trust his mother, she was still in the dark with most of the story, like

Mike's one too many brushes with death.

"Max," Karen spoke up, standing up, with her plate. "Would you be interested in Babysitting Holly for a few hours next week?"

"I'd love to, Mrs. Wheeler," Max smiled, copying the same silly face that Holly was making.

She'll open up when she's ready, Mike thought.

Don't wake a sleeping bear.

Let it rest peacefully.

Author's Note:

Thanks for reading! I'd love to hear your thoughts and opinions! I take requests on my tumblr or in the comments below!